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# CONSUMER ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR WHEN SELECTING A HOLIDAY DESTINATION

- Introducing Kurdistan to the Finnish traveler

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## ABSTRACT

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The aim of the thesis was to study how consumers' attitudes, behavior and knowledge affect their choice when selecting a holiday destination. In addition to this the writers of this study wanted to introduce Iraqi Kurdistan to the Finnish tourist market. Another aim was to find out the attitudes and knowledge of the Finnish tourists on Kurdistan when considering the region as a holiday destination. The purpose of the research was to see how Finnish tourists view the region of Kurdistan and if they had the willingness to travel to the location. The target group for this study was Finnish tourists who have not visited Kurdistan.

The theoretical framework is based on the definition of the concepts attitudes, behavior and consumer behavior in tourism. The literature review helps to determine attitude and destination image and its components.

For the empirical data primary and secondary data were collected by conducting interviews using a qualitative approach as well as by analyzing two published reports. The research was conducted in Vaasa, Finland.

The findings of this research seem to suggest that Kurdistan has the potential of one day becoming a popular holiday destination. However, much in this lies on the location and safety, and the security of the region. The majority of the interviewees had the interest, knowledge and a positive attitude and considered Kurdistan as a beautiful, modern and attractive place, which was not anticipated at the outset. The respondents gave an affirmative answer when asked if willing to travel to Kurdistan. However, this does not necessarily confirm that their positive attitude and knowledge will lead to a visit to Kurdistan.

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Keywords: attitude, consumer behavior, Finnish tourist market, Kurdistan, destination image, qualitative research

## TIIVISTELMÄ

Tekijä	Soraya Palani, Seima Sohrabi
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Tämän opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli tutkia miten kuluttajien asenteet, käyttäytymiset ja tietämykset vaikuttavat heihin valitessa lomakohteita. Tämän lisäksi opinnäytetyön tutkijat halusivat esitellä Kurdistan suomalaiselle turisti markkinanalle. Tämän tavoitteen toisena osana oli selvittää suomalaisten turistien asenteet ja tietämykset Kurdistanista, jos he harkitsisivat aluetta matkakohteekseen. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli myös nähdä millainen kuva suomalaisilla turisteilla oli Kurdistanista ja olisivatko he halukkaita matkustamaan kohteeseen. Tämän tutkimuksen tutkittavana kohderyhmänä olivat suomalaiset turistit, jotka eivät ole aikaisemmin käyneet Kurdistanissa.

Teoreettinen osa perustuu määritelmään, jossa käsitellään asenteita, käyttäytymistä sekä kuluttajien käyttäytymistä matkailussa. Kirjallisuus osa auttaa määrittämään asenteet ja matkakohteiden kuvan komponentit. Tutkimuksen empiirisessä osassa tietoa kerättiin haastattelujen sekä raporttien analysoinnilla käyttämällä kvalitatiivista tutkimusmenetelmää. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että Kurdistanilla on hyvät mahdollisuudet muodostua matkailukohteeksi, mutta osa tästä kehityksestä on hyvin kiinni alueen turvallisuus asemasta ja sen sijainnista. Suurimmalla osalla haastatteluista ihmisistä löytyi kiinnostusta, tietoa ja positiivista asennetta kohdetta kohtaan ja he pitivät Kurdistania kauniina, modernina ja houkutteleva paikkana, jota ei tutkimuksen alussa ennakoitu.

Vastaajat antoivat myönteisen vastauksen kysyttäessä, matkustaisivatko he Kurdistaniin, toisaalta tämä ei välttämättä takaa sitä, että heidän positiivinen asenne ja tietämys alueesta johtaisivat vierailuun.

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Avainsanat: asenne, kuluttaja asenne, suomalainen turisti markkina, Kurdistan, matkakohde kuva, kvalitatiivinen tutkimusmenetelmä

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# **1 INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Background of the study**

It is in human nature to be curious and try to figure out what lies beyond our own boundaries, and ever since the ancient Greeks and Romans human beings have been travelling. However, over the past decades tourism and the tourism industry have experienced continued growth, increased diversity, and become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world. The evolving marketplace of the travel industry has started recognizing the importance of understanding the attitudes, beliefs, and values of today's travelers for a more profitable, satisfactory, and higher quality of service opportunities.

Matters that will be discussed in this thesis are how people's attitudes, behavior, and knowledge influence their choice of destination. The chosen segment is specifically the travelling attitude and destination images of Finnish consumers. Because both of us writers are originally from Kurdistan, we were interested in the attitudes of the Finns towards Kurdistan as a tourism destination, and also how Kurdistan can use this knowledge to their benefit/advantage and market Kurdistan in a way making it a more welcoming/appealing destination for the Finnish travelers. Because Kurdistan is neither a very familiar place to most Finns, nor an independent country, we would also like to see how the knowledge of the area, and the information we provide to the respondents/participants in the empirical part of the thesis can change their attitudes and perceptions about Kurdistan.

## **1.2 Aims of the study and Research questions**

The primary aim of this study is to examine the factors influencing the choice of holiday destination, and how important the role of destination image is in the decision making process. The secondary aim is to get Finnish people's view on Kurdistan, and how to suggest ways of improving or upgrading the marketing of Kurdistan so it reaches the requirements of the potential Finnish consumers.

The aim of the research is to enrich the Finnish people's knowledge of Kurdistan as a potential tourism destination through a short interview.

The research questions are as follows:

- A. How does one's attitudes, knowledge, and behavior influence the choice of holiday destination?
- B. How important is the destination image?
- C. What is the Finnish tourists' attitude and behavior towards Kurdistan as a tourism destination?
- D. How can Kurdistan be marketed in a way that reaches the requirements of the Finnish tourist?

### **1.3 The structure of the thesis**

The thesis starts with an introduction chapter 1 where the reasons for the research, the goal of the research as well as the research problem are explained. Continuing the thesis goes in to chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 for the theoretical framework. Chapter 2 explains the concept of attitude, as well as how it is formed and modified. Chapter 3 examines first more deeply the general view of consumer behavior, and it ends with consumer behavior in tourism. Also in this chapter, the correlation between attitude and behavior is explained. In chapter 4, the basics of marketing and how a destination can be marketed is studied and the destination's image is presented. Chapter 5 gives an intro to the Iraqi Kurdistan briefly as well as describes the region's tourism elements.

The second part of the thesis is the empirical part or research study, which consists of methodology, data collection, analysis of data and a conclusion to the thesis. The thesis is closed with research criticism and suggestions for further studies.

#### **1.4 Restrictions within the research**

Because of life changing circumstances, being a full-time student as well as working led to some restrictions on the aim, time, and the execution of the thesis. Originally it was planned to do both a qualitative and quantitative research, and complete the writing of the thesis by the beginning of the summer of 2013. However, because of personal life changes causing distance between us, and lack of time spent on the thesis, the work was divided in parts, and constructed together over email and instant messaging.

As mentioned we had the intention of doing a quantitative research study, a questionnaire, but unfortunately that was left out of the plan due to a lack of time.

Another restriction was to get in to contact with possible participants, Finnish people, for the interview as we had no previous personal contacts with them.

## 2 ATTITUDES

Every day we are being asked to express our attitudes as a consumer, we all have a large number of attitudes towards products, services, advertisements, direct mail, the Internet, and retail stores, for example. We might be asked whether we like or dislike a product (e.g. a Sony DVD player), a service (e.g. Anvias broadband Internet service from the telephone company), a particular retailer (e.g. K-Citymarket), and a specific direct marketer (e.g. Amazon.com), or an advertising theme (e.g. McDonald's "I'm Lovin' it"). In all these circumstances we are put in a certain position to explicit our opinion, in this case our attitude. (Schiffman, Kanuk – 2004, p.251)

Our everyday lives are influenced by attitudes, and affected in the ways which we judge, and react towards other people, objects, and events. The word "attitude" is tossed around in everyday conversations, but few are likely able to define the precise meaning of the term. You might be asked, "What is your attitude towards foreigners", or someone might nag, "Young lady I don't like your attitude". Attitude is not a concept that can be easily defined, and there is no agreed precise definition of "attitude" among social psychologists.

### 2.1 Definitions of attitudes

What are then attitudes?

As mentioned earlier, there is no agreed definition for the term *attitude*, and different academicians and researcher have defined attitudes in various ways: the following have been listed here to show the many researchers approach towards the term.

Oxford dictionary defines attitudes as a settled way of thinking or feeling about something - *he was questioned on his attitude to South Africa*. This sounds simple and easy to understand but attitudes are related to a person's thoughts and feelings which cannot be easily observed because they are not part of the person's physical

features and we do not have passage to an individual's mind. This makes attitudes a hypothetical characteristic and, therefore, many different researchers have different definitions on the term. (Oxford dictionaries – online)

Icek Ajzen, professor of Social Psychology and author of *Attitudes, Personality, and Behavior* 2nd ed. (2005), characterizes attitude as a disposition where one responds in favor or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event.

Chris Fill defines attitudes as, "Attitudes are learned through past experiences and serve as a link between thoughts and behavior". Attitudes are, therefore, distinguished by a preference or state where one is prepared to respond - because of experiences in comparable situations in the past - in a certain way to particular stimuli (Fill – 2006, p. 62)

As with the interpretations mentioned above, there might be disagreements on the precise definition and nature of the term, but at the same time there seems to be a general understanding that attitudes are somewhat enduring systems which influence an individual to respond in a certain way. Attitude is a predetermined behavior, and manner to respond and react to related objects, concepts or situations, and these behaviors and reactions are created from previous experiences.

## **2.2 Formation of attitudes**

How do attitudes form? That is something no one seems to neither question nor think about much. No one is born with an attitude, but gradually as we humans go on with our lives, attitudes start to form. They might form from an advertisement towards a product or a brand or they might model from a friend's behavior. There are many internal and external factors which model and create our attitudes towards an object, or in our case a destination.

In one of the few theories on the formation of attitudes, it is stated that people use observations of their own behavior to determine what their attitudes are. Just as

we assume that we know the attitudes of others by watching what they do. The theory also states that we maintain consistency by concluding that we must have a positive attitude towards an object if we have bought it or consumed it. Thus, buying a product out of habit may result in a positive attitude towards it (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, - 1999, p. 129-130).

Consumers constantly form their attitudes towards known and unknown products, thus, in some cases tighten their attitudes towards a specific brand which they are satisfied and familiar with. By being accustomed to always purchasing and using the same brand and, of course, being satisfied with the products provided by the same company, consumers tend to create a positive attitude towards the brand which leads to a favorable attitude.

Consumers often purchase new products that are associated with a favorably viewed brand name. Their favorable attitude toward the brand name is frequently the result of repeated satisfaction with other products produced by the same company. (Schiffman, Kanuk – 2004, p. 265)

However, sometimes attitudes follow the purchase and consumption of a product. For example, a consumer might buy a brand name product without having a prior attitude toward it because it is the only product of its kind available (e.g. the last bottle of aspirin at a gas station). Consumers may also make trial purchases of new brands from product categories in which they have little personal involvement. As expected, if they find the products to be satisfactory, then they are likely to form a favorable attitude toward it. (Schiffman, Kanuk – 2004 p. 265)

### **2.3 Levels of commitment to an attitude**

Consumers vary in their commitment to an attitude; the degree of commitment is related to their level of involvement with their attitude object, as follows:

*Compliance:* Compliance is at the lowest level of involvement. An attitude is formed because it helps in gaining rewards or avoiding punishments from others.

Basically what this means is that an individual forms the sort of attitude which is accepted in order to please others and avoid judgment. As mentioned by the author in the book this attitude is superficial and can change when behavior is no longer monitored by others or when other options become available (Solomon et al. – 1999 p. 127).

*Identification:* The identification process of one's attitude occurs when attitudes are formed in order for the consumer to be similar to another person or group. Advertising that defines the social consequences of choosing some products over others is relying on the tendency of consumers to imitate the behavior of desirable models (Solomon et al. – 1999, p. 127).

*Internalization:* At high level of involvement these deep-seated attitudes are internalized and become part of the person's value system. These attitudes are difficult to change because they are very important to the person. For example, many consumers had strong attitudes towards Coca-Cola and when the company attempted to change to the New Coke formula they had a quiet negative reaction (Solomon et al. – 1999 p. 127).

## **2.4 The three components of attitudes**

### **2.4.1 Cognitive component (learn)**

The belief and knowledge held by individuals about a product or about precise attributes of the offering is what cognitive component refers to. It represents the formation of attitudes called learning.

### **2.4.2 Affective component (feel)**

An affective component of attitude relates to a person's feelings or emotions towards an object, whether it being good, bad, pleasant or unpleasant. Consumer feelings, sentiments, mood, and emotions about a product are included in this

component, and there are hundreds of different emotions that humans can experience and any one of these could be an affective component of attitude.

### **2.4.3 Conative component (do)**

When an individual dispositions or intents to behave in a certain way, this is when the *action* component of attitude is constructed. Academicians let us to understand that observable behavior is referred to as conative component (Shiffman,Kanuk-2004, p. 256-259)

## **2.5 Persuasion and attitude Change**

Schiffman and Kanuk introduce us to one of few strategies which is seen as an effective approach when trying to change consumers' attitudes toward a product. The functional approaches are functions that help us understand the positive and the negative attitudes that people have and also provide us with the information on how these functions work and how they can help us to modify or change people's attitudes to favorable ones.

### **2.5.1 Changing the basic motivational function**

One of the strategies of attitude change is changing the basic motivational function. This functional approach is known as one of the methods of changing motivation. According to this attitudes can be classified in four functions: *the utilitarian function, the ego-defensive function, the value-expressive function, and the knowledge function.*

*The utilitarian function:* People hold certain brand attitudes partly because of utility. When a product or a destination has served its purpose to us in the past, our attitudes tend to be favorable. In order to change people's attitudes towards something, you need to show them that the item can provide something with a utilitarian purpose which they might not have thought of before. For example, in



our case a short video clip of Kurdistan and its offerings can be shown to the audience to sway their attitudes to a favorable direction.

*The ego-defensive function:* These are attitudes with which most people want to protect their ego and self-image. People rather have security and self-confidence than insecurity and uncertainty. An ego defensive attitude helps us protect our decision making even if the decision be a poor one.

*The value-expressive function:* Value-expressive function holds a person's general values, lifestyle and outlook. What a person values is seen in his/her lifestyle, e.g. if a consumer's attitude toward being "in fashion" is positive then his/her attitude toward high-fashion clothing is likely to reflect that viewpoint. Similarly, a conservative person who has an unfavorable attitude toward bright clothing will be attracted to more toned down, dark clothing.

*The knowledge function:* People have the tendency or need to know and understand people and things they encounter. "The need to know tends to be specific. Therefore, an individual who does not play golf, nor wishes to learn the sport is unlikely to seek knowledge or understanding of the game. This will influence the amount of information search devoted to this topic. Thus, out of our need to know come attitudes about what we believe we need or do not need to understand." (Schiffman, Kanuk – 2004 p. 269-273)

### **2.5.2 Associating the product with a special group, event, or a cause**

Schiffman and Kanuk explain how attitudes can be linked together or at least in some parts. It is possible for marketers to change attitudes of the people by associating their products with a cause or event. For example the famous ice cream factory Ben & Jerry's in the United States is recognized not only for its delicious ice creams, but for its good cause where it donates 7.5 percent of the company's pretax profits to a variety of causes. Here companies mention the

relationship between their products to the causes, which eventually may alter the consumer's attitude toward the product. (Schiffman, Kanuk – 2004 p. 269-273)

### **2.5.3 Resolving two conflicting attitudes**

“Attitude change strategies can sometimes resolve actual or potential conflict between two attitudes”. This means that if a person has a negative attitude toward a product or a brand, his/her attitude can be changed by making him/her see that his/her current attitude does not conflict with another attitude. Schiffman and Kanuk presented an example about Stanley, who is a serious amateur photographer who wants to move from 35mm photography into the realm of medium format photography so that he could take advantage of the larger negative size. Since technology is improving at a high speed, Stanley is unsure if he should move to the medium format. So Stanley loves the idea of having the new camera to work with (attitude 1), but he thinks it might be a unwise purchase decision since these cameras are most likely to be replaced by digital photography in the near future (attitude 2). Nevertheless, if the company can make Stanley see that this new camera offers both film and digital capability, he might change his attitude and thus resolve his conflicting attitudes (Schiffman, Kanuk – 1999, p.273).

### **2.5.4 Altering components of the multi-attribute model**

The multi-attribute model has four different sub-models which provide us with few suggestions on attitude- change strategies and especially on how to manage attitude change: (1) changing the relative evaluation of attributes, (2) changing brand beliefs, (3) adding an attribute, and (4) changing the overall brand rating (Shiffman, Kanuk – 2004 p. 275).

#### *Changing the Relative Evaluation of Attributes*

The overall market for many product categories is displayed so that different segment groups are offered different brands with different features or benefits. For

example, within product categories such as tea or coca cola different attributes are offered to the consumer. The market can be divided into regular colas or diet colas and in the case of teas there are regular teas and herbal teas. In general product category is divided into distinctive features or attributes which appeal to certain type of segment of consumers. Some consumers might favor one version of the product so marketers get an opportunity to persuade the consumers to shift their favorable attitudes to another version of the product and vice versa. One example product can be contact lenses where consumers prefer one version which is standard “soft” contact lenses, but the marketers want to change their favorable attitudes toward another version, i.e. disposable contact lenses (Schiffman, Kanuk – 2004 p. 276)

#### *Changing Brand Beliefs*

The most common advertising appeal is the changing brand beliefs strategy where focus is more on changing beliefs or perceptions about brand itself.

In general, an attitude change technique is deemed effective to the extent that it modifies either a person’s self-report of attitudes or the attitude assessed with a more indirect or implicit measure. For example, if a person is neutral toward an abstract symbol prior to the change treatment, but is more favorable afterward, the attitude change was successful (Schiffman, Kanuk – 2004 p. 276)

We thought these functions would be relevant to bring out in our study since we are trying to understand people’s attitudes and how they can be influenced and eventually change to favorable one toward our case country Kurdistan.

### **3 CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AND THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

In this chapter we will deal with the issues that affect consumers' buying behavior, the characteristics behind consumers' decision making and also explain the decision making process briefly. To be able to understand a person's attitude towards a specific matter we need to understand what lies behind the action, and the person's background and characteristics. Therefore, subjects such as cultural, social, psychological, personal, beliefs etc. are dealt with. The researchers Kotler, Bowen, and James (2006), of the book *Marketing for hospitality and tourism* (p. 199-217), explain the factors behind consumer behavior as follows:

#### **3.1 Factors affecting consumer behavior**

Consumer buying is very much influenced by cultural, social, personal, and psychological factors. Below all four factors will be presented shortly, but the main focus will be set on the psychological elements because they include the most relevant discussion for this thesis. The factors presented in the psychological part are: motivation, perception, learning, and beliefs and attitudes.

##### **3.1.1 Cultural factors**

*Culture.* One of the deepest and most widespread influences on consumer behavior is cultural factors. Culture appears as the most central foundation for an individual's wants and behavior, consisting of the basic values, perception, wants, and behaviors that a person constantly comprehends in the society surrounding him. There are several ways in which culture can be expressed; the most obvious would be through tangible objects like food and clothing. It is a very integral part of the hospitality and travel industry; determining what we eat, how we travel, where we travel, and where we stay. Culture is dynamic and adapts to its environment, for example, the health phenomenon which has resulted in many

hotels adding health related facilities or bought contracts with local health clubs for the guests having the possibility to access.

*Subcultures.* Under cultures there are smaller groups of people, or subcultures, that share the same value system based on common life experiences and situations. These groups include nationalities, religions, racial groups, and geographic regions. Examples of subcultures can be the Hispanic or the African American consumers in the US.

Trying to understand the consumer behavior within the borders of the same country is hard as is, but for companies which operate on global basis, understanding and serving the needs of consumers can be very intimidating. People from different countries might have some things in common, but what might vary drastically are their values, attitudes and behaviors.

*Social class.* Social classes can be found in almost all societies, they are a relatively permanent and ordered division in a society where the members share similar values, interests, and behaviors.

### **3.1.2 Social factors**

Besides the cultural factors, consumer behavior is altered also by the social factors, which include; consumers groups, family, social roles, and status. (Kotler et. al. 2006)

*Groups.* There are many small groups indicating an individual's attitudes and behavior. When a person belongs to a group where he/she has a direct influence, it is called a membership group including primary groups such as family, friends, and coworkers. The more formal and with less interaction are the different secondary groups, containing religious groups, professional associations, and trade unions among others.

Other groups which an individual can be part of and be influenced by are reference groups (face-to-face), and aspirational groups (admired groups an individual would like to be part of).

*Family.* One's buying behavior is strongly influenced by family members, and in the American societies family continues to be the most important consumer buying organization. As time goes on and lifestyles change, the buying roles change as well. With the change of traditional house-wife role, comes more woman imprinted decisions, and children are another segment which have an influential power in market in today's society.

*Roles and Status.* As brought up, a person belongs to many groups, everything from a family group to organizational groups. The position each individual has in every group is defined in terms of roles and status. When a person is expected to perform according to the people around him or her, then her/his activities indicate the role they have in the group. Therefore, each role an individual acts out does influence his/her buying behavior.

### **3.1.3 Personal factors**

Kotler et al. continue to explain, that a consumer's decision is influenced by personal factors such as age and life-cycle stage, occupation, economic situation, lifestyle, and personality and self-concept. These factors will be presented here shortly.

*Age and life-cycle stage.* With time the goods and services people consume change. Taste changes and how we perceive for instance, food and clothing in early life may be replaced by another perception, with age comes the change in people's preferences. The life cycle can be based on how people develop in their *family life-cycle*; a young unmarried person usually has less financial burdens than those with family. How satisfied one is in a specific area can vary with time, needs come and go and new ones arise.

*Occupation.* A person's profession will affect the goods and services consumed. For instance, a carpenter often buys clothes capable of withstanding wear and tear and a bank-man's purchases include more shirts and polished pants.

*Economic situation.* The economic situation of an individual has a considerable influence on what a consumer can and cannot buy. Even if the consumer wants and considers a holiday vacation abroad it may not be possible due to financial restrictions. Marketers of income depending goods need to watch the trends in people's income, savings and interest rates.

*Lifestyle.* Even if people have the same cultural and social background they may have very different lifestyles. A person's lifestyle can be described as the pattern of living which he shows up through activities, interests and opinions. Lifestyle is something beyond social class and personality. By mapping different lifestyles marketers can try to categorize potential consumers in different groups. What drives the customers' needs, and how is something that needs to be answered. This can be answered by mapping it of a traditionalist who wants to preserve everything as it is or a materialist who just wants more. Is it an individualist or vice versa. Rationalist, trendsetter, epicurean, and the home-loving are other categories of people that are trying to describe the consumer's lifestyle.

*Personality and self-concept.* Personality and self-image is, of course, a wide topic that can be difficult to describe. Kotler et. al. write that personality is often described in terms of distinguished psychological characteristics that lead to responses which are relatively constant and persistent to the environment.

A concept that is used by marketers that is related to personality is *a person's self-concept* or *self-image*. This is a complex mental self-picture we have of ourselves, and our behavior tends to be consistent with this image. In other words, the characteristics that can be attributed to a product are in accord with the consumers' personality. People who identify themselves as extroverts are more likely to go on

a vacation that involves interaction with other people than sail on the sea for weeks, which is believed an introvert person might do.

#### **3.1.4 Psychological factors**

A consumers' purchases are influenced by four major psychological factors: Motivation, perception, learning ability, as well as beliefs and attitudes.

*Motivation.* A person has many needs at any given time; some of them are biological occurring from hunger, thirst, and discomfort and the others are psychological originating from states of tension such as the need to be recognized, esteemed, or belonging. A motivation is a need that is aroused to a sufficient level of intensity, and motivation is something that everyone has to some degree. *Abraham Maslow*, the proposer of the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, described how needs can be divided according to a certain order of priority which he called hierarchy or stairs. At the bottom are the physiological needs like providing food when you are hungry. Maslow sought to explain why some people were trying to satisfy certain needs in certain situations. Maslow came to the answer that in order to continue to the next step in the hierarchy of needs a person is required to only satisfy the underlying need, meaning that when that, at that moment important need, is satisfied it will no longer be a motivating factor and the person will try to satisfy the next need.

*Maslow's hierarchy of needs with all levels:*



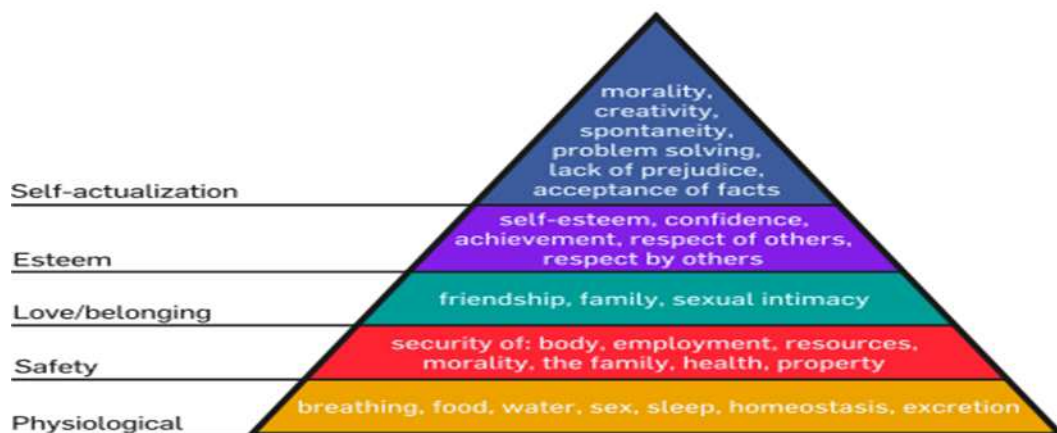


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

These needs are normally prioritized. For example, a student with just the student loan/financial aid and no other income is less likely to book a trip to Thailand on spring break; the person is rather likely to spend the money on smaller entertainment purchases.

*Perception.* A motivated person is ready to act. What the action will be depends on how the person sees the situation. Two people with the same motivation and needs, set in the same circumstances, may act entirely differently because of how they see or perceive the setting. As an example, a sales person who is regarded as talkative and pressuring by some can be seen as well-read and compelling by others, and the result is that one consumer buys the product while the other walks away without buying anything. The reason why we perceive things so differently is that we are all individuals who take in, interpret and categorize information personally to create a meaningful picture of the world.

A person is exposed to an enormous amount of stimuli on daily bases, and because it is not possible for that individual to catch all of these, most stimuli are screened out; *the selective attention*. This means that marketers have a very demanding job trying to attract consumer's attention.

Even if we do catch a stimulus it does not always come through as the sender had intended. When a person has a tendency of twisting information into personal meanings and defines it in a sense that it fills the persons' preconceptions it is called *selective distortion*. This is a matter that marketers cannot really manage or change.

From all the information a person takes in and learns he forgets much, but the information that supports and agrees with his/her attitudes and beliefs is the kind that is kept. This is called the *selective retention*.

*Learning.* A person learns by acting, and learning indicates changes in a person's behavior emerging from experience. According to learning theorists most of human behavior is learned, and it occurs through exchange of drives, stimuli, cues, responses, and reinforcement. Based on this theory the results of our actions will shape how we act in future situations. One can say that the consumer generalizes his/her response to a previous stimulus. The opposite of generalization is discrimination, in the latter case; the consumer has learned to identify the differences between two different products and can adapt his/her response in line with this.

*Beliefs and Attitudes.* A belief is a descriptive thought that a person has about something. A consumer may have said that Hilton hotels have the best facilities and offer the most professional service in hotels of its price range, and all these opinions are not necessarily based on facts. And these beliefs may be based on actual knowledge, perceptions, or faith and it may or may not carry an emotional charge. This is an interesting matter for marketers because of the beliefs that people have about particular product and services. According to Kotler et.al (2006), people act on beliefs, therefore reinforcing beliefs a product and its brand images. If a consumer has a belief that prohibits him/her from purchasing a specific product, marketers will advertise it in a sense to change the belief.

*Attitudes* have been discussed in earlier stages of this thesis; therefore a short summary of the topic will be presented here. Attitude is a person's ability to behave in a consistent manner, positively or negatively towards a given object or idea. A person's attitude affects the way he thinks, feels and behaves in certain aspects of their environment so as to different retailers, television programs, and products and services.

There are many factors and personal characteristics that affect the consumer behavior, and the choice of the matter is a result of a complicated intercommunion of cultural, social, personal and psychological factors. Some of these factors can easier be accessed by marketers, and others are highly impossible to influence or be changed.

### **3.2 Correlation between attitude and behavior**

As we have come across many times in the text above most definitions of attitude include some connection, however strong or lose and regardless of the direction, between behavior and attitudes. Attitude is set to be a feeling, belief, or opinion of approval or disapproval towards something, while behavior is an action or reaction that occurs in response to that feeling, belief or opinion. With this, attitudes are said to influence, explain, and predict consumer behavior.

It is also argued that not only does attitudes influence behavior but it can also be reversed, that behavior shapes and influences attitudes.

### **3.3 The buyer decision making process**

In the mentioned book by Kotler et. al. we continue to examine the buyer decision making process (p. 217-222).

With the knowledge of what affects the consumer buying behavior, we now look into the decision making process. The consumer decision making process consists of mainly five steps according to most researchers within the field (presented in

figure 2 down below). They also stated that the steps included in the model are: need or problem recognition, information search, and evaluation of alternatives, purchase and the post-purchase process. However, not all purchases require every step. A consumer can skip the evaluation of alternatives when considering low involvement products, and when a person is skipping information search and evaluation it is referred to as an *automatic response loop*.



Figure 2. Buyer Decision Process

***Need recognition*** is the first part of the buying process according to Kotler et al (2006). The buyer recognizes a problem or a need. The buyer then feels a difference in how he feels right now and how he wishes he felt. A need can come from internal stimuli such as hunger and thirst. Because of past experiences, the buyer knows how he to handle the need and is motivated to try to satisfy it. Needs can also come from external stimuli; for example, a TV commercial for a resort in the Caribbean, or passing by a restaurant and smelling the aroma of the food which stimulates hunger can lead to eating out for dinner.

What marketers need to figure out at this is stages is researching what created the problem or need, and develop a product/service which fulfills the need.

The second stage, being the ***information search***, depends on how strong the consumer's drive is. The search for information begins in the consumer's memory. If the information, internal, found there is considered to be sufficient enough for the consumer to purchase the item there is no need to search further, but usually there will be an extended evaluation by an external search, the sources being; *personal sources* (family, acquaintances, coworkers), *commercial sources* (advertising, sales-personnel, dealers) , and *public sources* (hotel/restaurant reviews, consumer-rating organizations). Therefore, the consumer's awareness

and knowledge of available products and their features is increased by gathering information.

This leads us into the third stage, *the evaluation of alternatives*, when one considers that he possesses sufficient information about the needed product, he begins to use the information to choose and compare between different product alternatives. There are some basic concepts explaining consumer evaluation process: a distinction based on *objective* product attributes such as color, price, quality and the *subjective* such as brand, and status.

The following step would, naturally, be the *purchase decision*. When evaluated the products in the previous stage, the consumer ranks the brands in the choice set and forms purchase intentions. Commonly, the most preferred brand will be purchased, but there are two factors that affect the difference between the purchase intention and the actual purchase decision; *the attitudes of others* and *unexpected situations*. In the situation of the attitudes of others the purchase influence is dependent on how close the other person is to the consumer, and how intense their attitudes are; the closer the person the more intense the influence.

The purchase intention is formed after the factors such as the consumer's family income, expected price, and expected benefits from the purchase. Thus, when an unexpected situation occurs, it can change the purchase intention.

The last step in the buying decision process is the *post-purchase evaluation*, this process is carried out after the actual purchase is made; if the product matches the consumer's expectations he/she will experience satisfaction, but if it falls short then it leads to an unsatisfied experience.

These expectations, as we have discussed previously, are based on past experiences and on information that are received from sellers, friends, and other information sources. When a consumer feels discomfort caused by post-purchase conflicts, it results in *cognitive dissonance*. After the purchase, it is natural for the consumer to try to ensure that the choice made is the right one. He may, for

example, seek confirmation from friends and acquaintances for support in their belief that the product bought is really good. The post-purchase behavior shows that the marketers need to understand that the job does not end once the purchase has been made; the post-purchase actions can be of significant interest to the marketer.

### **3.4 Consumer behavior in Tourism**

Consumer behavior functions as a foundation for marketing enterprises. It is a crucial part of understanding why people tend to choose a certain destination and what sort of factors influences them. The decision process of buying tourism products or services takes time, because they are mostly intangible and there are many risks involved in the buying process.

The decision to spend non-refundable money on travel versus purchasing tangible products involves psychological determinants. The most important variables are demographics and lifestyles among others that are prestige, escape, sexual opportunity, education, social interaction, family bonding, relaxation, and self-discovery (Kotler et al. 2003, 728.) Therefore, in order to understand comprehensively customer behavior in tourism, various models have been developed to describe and generalize consumer behavior patterns. The models attempt to show the important role of different elements affecting the decision making process (Swarbrooke et al. 2007, 40-48.)

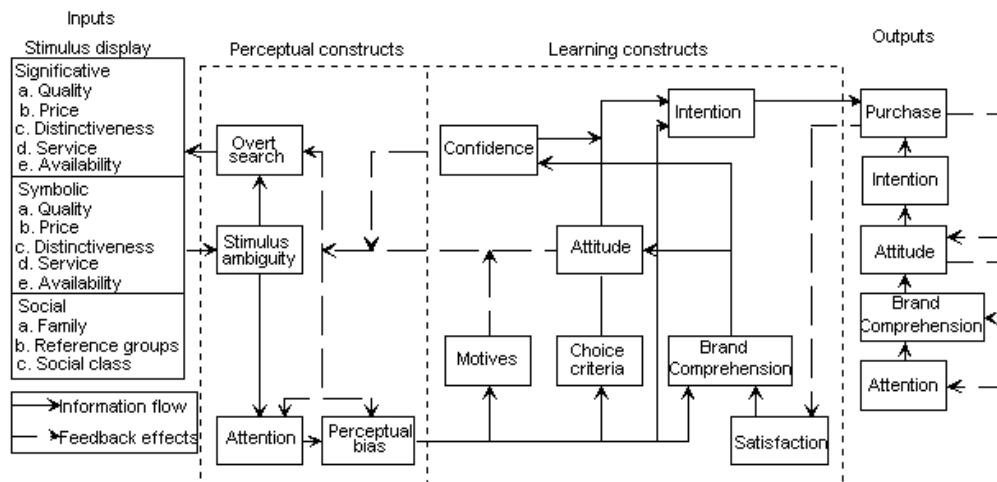


Figure 3: The Howard-Sheth model of buyer behavior,

Source: Swarsbrooke & Horner – 2007

The most known model of all consumer behavior models is the Howard-Sheth model of buyer behavior, developed in 1969. The importance of the model is highlighted through the importance of inputs to the consumer buyer process, and gives suggestions on ways that the consumer can order these inputs before making a final purchasing decision.

Travel buying behavior, just like the overall buying behavior, includes passing the five stages of decision making process; first feeling the need for travel or travel desire, then information collection and evaluation image, travel decision, travel experience and satisfaction, and finally outcome and evaluation.

## 4 MARKETING AND DESTINATION IMAGE

In this section we discuss the various aspects of marketing and destination image and how destination can be marketed to tourists.

### 4.1 Marketing

Before we go into how to market a destination, let's first discuss shortly what marketing is. The definition of marketing includes activities which companies are associated with, such as buying and selling goods and services. These activities include advertising, selling and delivering products to the target market. Typically a company has a marketing department whose job is to get the attention of the target audience by using slogans, packaging design, celebrity endorsements and general media exposure. As we know marketing is a broad area, so we will not go deeply into it, but will try to shortly explain what is included in the process of marketing and reaching consumers.

*“The key aspect of marketing is an attitude of mind. It requires that, in taking “marketing” decisions, the manager looks at these from the viewpoint of the consumer. These decisions will thus be driven by what the consumer needs and wants” (Mercer, 1992:11)*  
- (Seaton, Bennett – 1999 p. 7)

The whole purpose of marketing is to reach consumers and ensure them that what they desire is provided to them. In order to convince consumers of this message, it is crucial for manufacturers to understand the wants and needs of the target market. Once these are understood and the satisfaction of the target market is achieved, the products virtually sell themselves.

One of the important aspects of marketing is the *marketing mix*. Marketing mix includes four elements which are called the “four P’s.”; product (goods and services), price (cost of the product), place (stores where products are available) and promotion (advertising, personal selling). A well-organized marketing plan where all these elements are positioned in the right place can bring and maintain



companies with well satisfied customers that will purchase continuously in the present and future times.

Advertising and high selling comes to the minds of most people when thinking of marketing, which is very logical since those are the main aspects of marketing that frequently come across. Marketing involves creating the needed products, pricing those products, placing those products where consumers can buy them and via promotion communicating the marketers message to the selected target market. (Schewe – 1997 p.4)

#### **4.2 The Destination and its image**

Tourism destination can be thought of as one or many product(s). It consists of many elements which are used to attract visitors. A destination is an entity which comprises every kind of tourism organization and operation in its geographical area, these include; hotels, transport, attractions etc. It can literally include anything in a region, (the people, the other industries, the landscape etc.) (Seaton, Bennett – 1999 p. 350-351)

As it is mentioned in the book of *Tourism Marketing*, Garnham (1995) states the elements that compose a sense of place, such as architectural style, natural setting, and use of local building materials, cultural diversity, societal values and public environments. (Lumsdon – 1997 p. 238-239)

As can be seen from the so far mentioned elements and attributes, tourism destination is full of divers' components and its dynamic; therefore it is not just a single product, but a bundle of offerings to the tourist.

Destination is considered as the central tourism product that drives all others, but there necessarily might not be a central agency or organization marketing it. We think that in order for Kurdistan to become a central tourism product or on the road to become a tourism product, its success will depend on national and regional tourism organizations. As the region is developing not only as whole, but also as a

tourism destination, it needs to welcome all the necessary guidance from tourism organizations and be also willing to cooperate with other sectors that might have an influence on Kurdistan's image. Even though the region would not have a regional tourism organization it does not mean they are out of options, but they have, for example, Turkey as one of the neighboring countries that is one of the most visited destinations by Europeans, specifically by Finnish tourists. The cooperation with Turkey's tourism organizations would give the boost needed to start building an image for the region. As it is brought out in the book of marketing tourism products; Concepts, issues, cases, destination marketing is intentional or unintentional collaboration clearly because all the tourism organizations that market themselves in the area have some kind of impact in the overall picture of the destination. In order to successfully market the destination to its target markets all the tourism organizations in that region or country have to have linkage and be coherent with one another by cooperating in the planning and coordinating so that the funds may be generated and obtained (Seaton, Bennett - 1999 p. 350-351)

Destination is also seen as a physical and a socio-cultural entity that is formulated from its history, its people, its traditions and way of life. A destination actually exists not only physically, but it is also thought to exist in the mind of its tourist and potential tourist visitors. For a less known or unknown region such as Kurdistan, destination image concept is a crucial one. For a new comer in the tourism industry the image that Kurdistan gives out to its target market is the one that defines it as a destination worth or not worth visiting. While staying there the tourists have to be provided with the best care and the real feel of the place and its people. It has to be authentic so that the tourists will see the real beauty in that region and feel like this is a place that they would like to visit more than once (Seaton, Bennett - 1999 p. 350-351)

As can be expected a destination can be affected by many current events within the place, but also happenings that occur elsewhere, e.g. economic crisis or war.

Or it can be affected by the present circumstances e.g. terrorism or it can be affected by real events e.g. chemical attack by President Saddam Hussein where thousands of innocent people were killed. Kurdistan has many historic events that occurred while fighting for its freedom. Nowadays these attacks such as the chemical attack in Halabja are memorized in built museums where people can see for themselves what went on at that time.

Terrorism and war are still affecting the region of Kurdistan even though the area is considerably safe today, but because these happenings occur around the region it is very difficult to attract tourists to visit the region, especially tourists from Europe.

Destinations may differ in many ways such as in size, physical attractions, infrastructure, and their benefits to visitors and dependency on tourism.

*Size:* Destinations can be marketed by a tourist board that promotes a whole country or there might be a small voluntary group of local people in their villages filling their small shops with postcards, photographs and memorabilia to show their history and traditions to the tourists. Between those two a destination may also be state driven, a big city with its own marketing agency or convention bureau or a seaside resort marketed by its local government authority.

*Physical attractions:* There are well established destinations, such as traditional tourism destinations (Italy, Spain). These destinations are rich in cultural and heritage attractions, seaside resorts, mountain areas etc., while others may consist of little more than enclave products (the Gambia).

*Infrastructure:* Some countries may have access to all sorts of utilities; accommodation, transportations (rail, road, air) while others might not have the same accessibility to these utilities.

*Their benefits to visitors:* Destinations commonly offer different benefits to their tourists. Some meet the needs of mainstream recreational tourists (Spain) and others appeal primarily to business travelers.

*Dependence on tourism:* Some destinations with limited economic base are very depended on tourism than those with more diversified economy. For example, in Cuba and the Caribbean tourism is a more important economic activity than in most West European countries.

*“A Destination may not even be a single place, but a conceptual entity which incorporates several destinations and locations, e.g. Route 66 in America which crosses nine state boundaries but is perceived as a totality” (Seaton, Bennett – 1999 p.351)*

Out of all the marketing management tasks, one of the most important ones for the tourism marketer is to develop, and, or maintain a destination image corresponding in line with the targeted groups. Every destination has an image, whether negative or positive, which is in the hand of the marketer to either change or maintain to be able to attract its target group. Even though the destination image might not be precise, in the eye of the potential tourist, it does nonetheless provide linked set of beliefs and attitudes which can be based on word of mouth, pictorial references, and destination publicity (Lumsdon, 1997, p.245).

#### **4.3 Destination Marketing**

Destination marketing comprises of many different features that are involved in the marketing process. These features formulate the foundations underlying destination marketing. Features and offerings such as cultural in heritage, seaside resorts, accommodation facilities, natural recourses, built attractions etc. shape the form of tourism marketing at most destinations. These elements are the things that stimulate the interest in tourists. People usually travel to different places because they want to escape from their daily routines. By visiting different destinations they get to experience different life styles even if it is for a short period of time.

Destination marketing can be intentional or unintentional collaboration between tourism organizations in the area because they have some impact on the perception of the overall destination. Destination marketing requires planned cooperation, coordination and linkage between tourism organizations in a country or region where the destination can be coherently promoted to its target market. In most cases the tourism offices that are responsible for the marketing of the destination will have to draw up a strategy document where the roles of private and public sector organizations are brought out as to how they can plan and develop the promotion of the destination. In the marketing planning tourism authorities have to follow the rules and regulations set by the law as to how implement these plans into action. (Lumsdon. 1997, p. 242-243)

New destinations should target their offerings at allocentric travelers who are the ones seeking new adventurous places and always like to visit new unfamiliar destinations. People who are more comfortable in their usual familiar surroundings (psychocentric) are the kind of travelers to destinations such as Kurdistan should not be targeted at, at least in the beginning of the marketing process. These types of groups, such as allocentric and psychocentric are good to be studied so arising destinations know who their target market are and what attracts them.

## 5 IRAQI KURDISTAN AS A TOURISM DESTINATION

Kurdistan refers to portions of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, however, only the Iraqi region of Kurdistan is considered in this paper.

### 5.1 Kurdistan in brief

Kurdistan is located in Middle East and consists of large parts of eastern Turkey (Turkish Kurdistan), northern Iraq (Iraqi Kurdistan), northwestern Iran (Iranian Kurdistan), and northeastern Syria (Western Kurdistan) inhabited mainly by Kurds. The Kurds are regarded of being one of the oldest nationalities in the world, and the area one of the world's most ancient.

The Kurdistan Region is an autonomous region in federal Iraq and the regional capital is Erbil, also referred to in Kurdish, as *Hawler*. The establishment of the autonomous Kurdistan dates back to 1970 when an autonomy agreement was signed with Baghdad that declared autonomy for the region, but it was not until the year of 1991 that the agreement actually was implemented.

The area of the Kurdistan Region covers up to 40,643 square kilometers, clothed with a population of currently more than 5 million. The Kurdistan Region comprises parts of the three provinces of *Erbil*, *Sulaymaniah* and *Duhok*.

**Languages** spoken in the autonomous Kurdistan are Kurdish and Arabic. The two main dialects of Kurdish are *Soranî* and *Kurmanji*.

Iraqi Kurdistan has a diverse **religious** population. The dominant religion is Islam, adhered to by the majority of its inhabitants. These include Kurds, Iraqi Turkmen, and Arabs, belonging mostly to the Shafi'i, Sunni branch of Islam. Christianity is adhered to by Assyrian people and Armenian peoples (as well as by a few Kurds and Turkmen), and Yezidism make up a significant minority.

**Kurdish culture** is a bundle of peculiar cultural traits that is practiced by the Kurdish people. The Kurdish culture is a subsidy from various ancient peoples who have shaped the modern Kurds and their society, but primarily Iranians. Among their neighbors, the Kurdish culture is said to be closest to Persian culture

(Kurdistan Regional Government).

## 5.2 Transportation

Today travelling to the Kurdistan region by air is easily accessible, and once in Iraqi Kurdistan, there are several ways of getting around such as taxi, bus, and private car hire.

*By Air.* Iraqi Kurdistan has now open doors to the international world by with two international airports; *Erbil International Airport* (EIA), and *Sulaymaniah International Airport* (SIA), which both operates flights to Middle Eastern and European destinations. Turkish Airlines, Austrian Airlines, Lufthansa, Etihad, Royal Jordanian, Emirates, Gulf Air, Middle East Airlines, Atlas Jet, and Fly Dubai are currently all providing services to the Region. Most flights operating from Europe and the Middle East fly directly to Kurdistan, without flying via Baghdad.

*On Land.* The main for form of public transport between major cities is a shared taxi, the price is normally set price between the major cities this is then split according between the passengers in the car share. The average charge for use around the city is around \$2.

*Private Car Service:* There is also the possibility of hiring a car with or without a driver, however, they can often be quite expensive. If you choose to have a driver he can stay with you throughout your stay. This will offer you the chance to take time to travel and explore Kurdistan more, with a local driver they will know the most ideal places to go and can help you plan your trip.

*Bus:* There are bus services from Erbil to all cities in the Region, and into the south as well. There are two main Bus Terminals, East and North, in Erbil.

On a note, *The International Driver's License* is not accepted in Kurdistan. To be able to drive in Kurdistan a permit has to be emitted, this permit is received at the

police station where current driver's license is identified and the permit can then be issued. This permit is valid for a timetable of one month only; with a chance of renewable for additional one-month periods at a time. (Kurdistan Board of Investment)

### **5.3 Accommodation**

Whether it is a short-term, luxury, central or a cheap hotel the tourist is looking for, it can be found in Iraqi Kurdistan and booked at a reasonably comfortable price in an easy location. A walk through the center of any of the bigger towns or cities there are several, if not dozens, of hotel options ranging from cheap to three-to-five-star quality. For the budget traveler, the cheaper options are very suitable as even these hotels are all equipped with lobbies, reception desks, and clean and spacious rooms, most with private bathrooms and sometimes, a refrigerator and television. There are certainly options for those looking for a little more luxury in the form of a mid-range or upscale hotel.

The Kurdistan region is expanding fast. In 2007 the region had 106 hotels, and in 2012 it was reported to be more than 400 hotels in Iraqi Kurdistan, and big chains such as Marriott, Hilton, Kempinski and Sheraton are set to build new hotels here. (World Time Magazine – Online edition)

The area is equipped with five star hotels such as Hi Crust Hotel in Sulaymaniah, Erbil Rotana Hotel in Erbil, and Dilshad Palace in Duhok. (General Board of Tourism in Kurdistan Region – Iraq)

### **5.4 Attractions and entertainment**

The three provinces, *Erbil*, *Sulaymaniah* and *Dohuk*, which officially form the Iraqi Kurdistan, are labeled as a location of refuge and safety. The Kurdistan region serves as a direct haven and a tourist attraction for many Iraqis, as well as other commuters from the surrounding countries, who want to escape the unsafe



state that the rest of the Iraq, with additionally some other countries in Middle East, currently remain in. The region is an ideal destination for those who seek untouched mountain scenery and ancient archeological sites. The Kurdistan area being one of the world's most ancient inhabited places makes a visit to the cities a visit worth remembering, as the *Citadel* in Erbil is said to be the longest continually inhabited place in the world, believed to have been in continuous existence for 7000 years or even more. The Citadel is located dramatically on top of an artificial, 32-meters high earthen mound, and visually dominates the expansive modern city of Erbil. Its age, importance, and architectural heritage as well as today being one of the most dramatic and visually exciting cultural sites not only in the Middle East but also in the world, has made it deserving of the UNESCO's World Heritage Sites List.

In the province of Erbil there are the cities of Shaqlawa and Gali Ali Beg, Bekhal waterfalls and the water source at Jundyan, which not only offers beautiful scenery but they also offer fruits, vegetables, and fresh water. In Erbil province the hillside town of Rawandoz can be found, where Pank Resort is located; equipped with funfair rides and a roller-coaster sledge ride, and it is also surrounded by mountain views.

At Haji-Umran, where you will find the Kurdistan Region's highest mountains, the spa water is renowned locally for treating ailments and the highlands usually remain green through summer.

The Sulaymaniah province is furnished with the scenic Dokan and Derbendikhan lakes which are lined with cabins for visitors who want to enjoy boating or swimming. At Ahmadawa, located east of Sulaymaniah, the springs design several waterfalls surrounded by walnut, pomegranate and fig trees, all being attraction sources for visitors.

In Dohuk province at Silav resort, open-air restaurants provide a view looking up to the nearby ancient town of Amadiya, which sits on top of a two-kilometer wide elevation. The town offers a wonderful view of the nearby valleys and canyons, and here have Muslims and Christians lived alongside each other for centuries.

The best preferable and recommended time to visit Kurdistan is March when people celebrate Nawroz, the New Year marked by the spring rebirth, which is celebrated by having picnics and dancing in the hills and valleys.

Besides these natural appeals of Kurdistan, there are manmade attractions as well, including museums in both Sulaymaniah and Erbil holding collections of antiquities, statues and remains from the Region, while Dohuk Traditional Museum displays Kurdistan's folklore and heritage.

Sulaymaniah, assigned Kurdistan's cultural capital, has well visited bazaars as well as the modern Altun shopping centre and a bowling alley. At the large Azadi Park, children can enjoy the playground, swimming pool and artificial lakes. The public garden in the city centre is featured with statues of poets and writers.

Erbil has been named the 2014 Arab Tourism Capital by the Arab Council of Tourism. The city plans to host at least 40 different events and activities in 2014, ranging from skydiving, ice-skating, and a marathon, to traditional Kurdish arts and culture.

Now big than ever shopping centers and malls are being built in Kurdistan at a rapid speed, all offering a great opportunity for those who want to invest in the tourism aspect of Kurdistan (Kurdistan Regional Government).

## **5.5 Tourism development**

The New York Times placed the Iraqi Kurdistan on the 34<sup>th</sup> spot, in the article "The 41 Places to go in 2011" in 2011. Writing that "Safety, history and a warm welcome in a stable corner of Iraq."

This shows that the world around Kurdistan is acknowledging the beautiful scenery, the people and the fascinating culture that lies within the walls of Kurdistan (New York Times – online edition).

Safety might be a slight issue for tourists who are considering visiting Kurdistan in consideration of what occurs in the rest of Iraq safety wise. According to the

article, the State Department warns American tourists to avoid Iraq entirely; however the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office say that the Kurdistan region is an exception. “The risk of terrorism in the Kurdistan Regional Government-controlled provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniah is markedly and statistically lower than in other parts of Iraq,” states its Web site.

The same year the National Geographic named Kurdistan as one of the “20 best trips of 2011”, aimed at those looking for an out-of-the-ordinary destination for their next vacation.

The opportunity of the Kurdistan’s tourism is wide, and growing at an accelerating speed making it a great tourist destination for those who want to enjoy the beauty of the region as well as those wanting to invest their money, business wise (National Geographic).

Number of tourist visitors to the Kurdistan region in 2012					
No	Provinces	Tourists within the region of Kurdistan	Tourist outside the Kurdistan Region	Foreign tourist	Total
1	Erbil	147,146	1,049,235	322,449	1,518,830
2	Sulaymaniah	66021	256,032	52223	374,276
3	Dohuk	87735	158,444	55825	302,004
4	<u>Garmyan</u>	12242	6427	3214	21883
Total		313,144	1,470,138	433,711	2,216,993

5

Table 1: Tourism in Kurdistan region 2012

Source: The Official Website of the General Board of Tourism in Kurdistan  
Region - Iraq

Number of tourists Kurdistan Region of the year (2007 to 2012)		
Year	Number of tourist region of Kurdistan	Percentage increase
2007	377,397	
2008	558,860	%48
2009	791,345	%42
2010	1,313,841	%66
2011	1,702,390	%30
2012	2,216,993	%30

Table 2: Tourist growth in Kurdistan 2007-2012

Source: The Official Website of the General Board of Tourism in Kurdistan  
Region - Iraq

The tables 1 and 2 above, demonstrated by the Official Website of the General Board of Tourism in The Kurdistan Region, indicate the tourism growth in numbers, as well as in percentage since the year 2007. The tourists are mainly Iraqis outside of the Kurdistan Region, but the remaining are from the neighboring countries as well as visitors from the western countries.

## **5.6 Safety and Security in Kurdistan**

The security situation in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq is very unlike in the rest of Iraq. Fewer than 200 American soldiers are stationed in Kurdistan and not a single coalition soldier has lost their lives in the Region since the start of the Iraqi war in 2003.

The official Regional guard, the Peshmerga forces, are highly trained and experienced in providing security. They cooperate with the Regional Guard, the Asayish (the Security Police), and the regular Police, who provide comprehensive protection against threats and help with routine police matters.

To maintain the level of peace in Kurdistan, there are checkpoints on the borders and city perimeters. Separate advice must be sought for travel outside of the Kurdistan Region. It is recommended that visitors consult travel advice issued by their country of domicile (Kurdistan Regional Government)

## **6 THE RESEARCH**

In the following chapter the research methodology, research implementation process and the validity and reliability of the research will be explained.

### **6.1 Deciding the source of Information**

*Primary data* is data collected by the researcher and *Secondary data* is collected data in previously studied research papers. When a researcher personally conducts their own research it is called the primary data.

Population characteristics including in demographic data, such as age, income, and ethnicity are information, which have been already collected are referred to as secondary data (Kolb – 2006 p.159)

### **6.2 Qualitative and quantitative research methods**

The aim of *quantitative* research comprises of collection and analyses of statistically verifiable data involving the persistent use of sampling techniques. The researcher can apply the findings of the *representative sample* survey to the entire market, because the participants of the survey are thought to be representing the entire population being researched. Quantitative research is generally objective, and uses deduction and numbers; therefore results gotten can be generalized (Lumsdon, 1997, p. 130).

On the other hand, *qualitative* research aims to go deeper into the provided information and bring out the detailed material such as the attitude towards a tourism offering, but this does not in any way imply that it represents the sample population. A qualitative research method includes in-depth interviews, group discussions etc. to determine the attitudes and views of a certain product or place. Qualitative research allows the researcher to offer more in-depth representation of people's experiences, beliefs and attitudes in their studies (Lumsdon, 1997, p. 127). Due to the heaviness of the concepts mentioned in the theoretical framework the qualitative research was considered the most relevant method, requiring more

observation. The qualitative method also provides answers to the questions why and what if, which can answer our research questions.

*In-depth interviews* were conducted for our research, where we as interviewers interviewed each respondent face-to-face to briefly discuss the topic of the research. We had questions and guidelines ready prior to the interviews but allowed the respondent a free flow approach rather than structured questions and responses (Lumsdon, 1997, p.128). Interviews allow the researcher to examine the respondent's first response, and interviews can lead to follow up questions were the researcher can discover the interviewees underlying motive. For instance, when the interviewee is asked a question and the response is not informative enough, then the researcher has the possibility of asking following question that urges the interviewee to give a more in depth answer. We chose this method for this study because it has the advantage of exploring the topic more comprehensively.

In the theoretical study, different sources of literature are viewed. The source of information obtained varies from the Vaasa City library, Tritonia, Ebrary, the Internet as well as the data collected from the interviews and online published reports used in this empirical section of the thesis.

### **6.3 The Research Methodology and Implementation Process**

In this research the qualitative method was used to conduct the study, however as mentioned earlier, the original plan was to use both research methods. The quantitative research was left out due to no execution time and place. The interviews were conducted between the dates 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2013, except for the last one which was conducted on 30<sup>th</sup> of August 2013 at Vaasa University of Applied Science in Vaasa, Finland.

Based on our theoretical framework and the research questions we composed the interview questions, which were *eight* main questions that we had drawn up and also a few follow up questions came up during the interviews. We gathered few

pictures of Kurdistan, which the last question was associated with. The purpose of the presentation of these pictures was to see if the attitudes and knowledge the respondents acquire were influenced or changed after seeing the PowerPoint presentation of the pictures.

The respondents were contacted by the interviewers through Facebook and via phone, motivating them to take part in the research. In total ten people were contacted, and out of those ten six people agreed on participating. They were also informed beforehand about the aim of the research, and that their identities and information would be kept anonymous.

The interviews took place in locations most comfortable and convenient for the participants, as such in the home of the interviewees and in restaurants. The interviews were recorded with an Iphone application, with the permission of the participants. One of the interviews was carried out in English, three in Finnish and one in Swedish.

The aim of this study is primarily focusing on a tourist group who has not visited Kurdistan before. However, no specific segment was chosen for the purpose, and therefore the interviewees were selected randomly. It should be kept in mind that each participant belongs to one of the segments mentioned above in the theoretical study. Two of the participants belong to the Single segment, one to the Family segment and the remaining three are considered as Empty nesters. The interviewee's ages ranged between 22 and 75. They were chosen for the research within a population of Finnish people who not only have Finnish nationality but are also native Finnish. Besides being native Finnish the respondents had to fulfill the requirement of having some type of travel history. For the rest of this study, the participant will be referred to as *Single1* and *Single2* from the single segment, *Family*, and *Empty nesters 1-2-3*.

The interview questions are formed of three different parts. The first sets of questions are to collect data of the respondent's traveling habits and history. The



purposes of these questions is to determine the respondent's traveling patterns and the visited countries, and if these visited countries have any relation to Kurdistan either being a neighboring country or having similar cultures and climates. Another purpose is also to figure out what the demands and preferences there are, as well as what interviewees are looking for in a destination. The following three questions are to detect if the interviewees had any travels to the Middle East, and their knowledge on Kurdistan. The last two questions are inquired after a short PowerPoint slide presentation shown to the interviewees. The aim of the last questions is to determine whether the participant's knowledge and attitudes change for a more favorable/non-favorable towards Kurdistan. The data collected from the interviews will be analyzed according to the theoretical framework in the next chapter.

#### **6.4 Reliability, Validity of the Research**

*Reliability* is the extent to which research findings would be the same if the research would be repeated at a later date or with different sample of subjects. Like in natural sciences, the experimental findings and information is always mostly the same even after a long period of time. But in social sciences is quite opposite of this characteristics as social sciences deal with human behavior and society. As the change of our society is a continuous process which affects the human behavior, it is not wise to expect the same kinds of output to a research topic in a later period of time. Even though, the identical questions were about the same topic in the future, the result will certainly be different. It happens for time, location, people and social facilities (Veal, 2006, p.41).

As the rapid tourism development and changes of Kurdistan takes place, the results for similar researches such as this might not be the same or correct in the future. However, presently and for a certain period of time ahead these findings might help the people in charge of the marketing and development of Kurdistan. Furthermore, if a similar research were to be conducted with a different group in

comparable age groups and life-cycle stage, within a near future of 5-10 years the outcome can mostly likely be expected to be quite the same.

*Validity* extends to which the data collected by the researcher is able to reflect to the phenomenon being investigated. Finding valid and reliable information on leisure and tourism research is sometimes difficult because of the information provided by the interviewees is greatly related to their attitudes, behaviors, and experiences. Tools that are used include a number of shortcomings, which means that the information of leisure and tourism research seldom can be as accurate as the natural sciences (Veal, 2006, p.41).

## **7 ANALYZING THE COLLECTED DATA**

This chapter will be broken down to two separate sections; secondary and primary data analysis.

### **7.1 Analyzing the Secondary data**

The secondary data for this study was collected from the online webpages; Statistics of Finland (Finnish Travel 2012) and the Nordic Outbound Travel Market report 2011. A generalization has been made due to the similarities in traveling behaviors and habits among the Nordic countries. Therefore, we mainly refer to the tourists as Finnish considering the primary data research being conducted on native Finns.

#### **7.1.1 The travel habits and preferences of the Finnish tourist**

Finland, being located in Northern Europe, is one of the four countries; together with Sweden, Denmark and Norway, that are a highly important market for outbound travel, making Northern Europe the third largest outbound market in Europe. Income level in the Nordic countries is generally high – and a record-high percentage of the income is spent on travelling. Nordic tourists' per capita travel spending being one of the highest in the world makes the tendency to travel abroad more regular than that of any other tourist group in the world. As expected with the higher incomes, the Nordic tourists tend to spend 90 % more money than the average European tourist on food, accommodation and attractions during their holiday. (The Nordic outbound travel Market- 2011). The escape from the harsh winter climates at home makes the people of Northern Europe chase the warmer climates of the south, thus these travelers are referred to as “snow birds” (J.Swarbrooke & S. Horner – 2007). The Finnish tourist belongs to this market.

In 2012, Finns made 7.8 million different leisure trips abroad. The number increased by 17 per cent from 2011. In 2012, leisure trips abroad numbered 5,836,000; Estonia being evidently the most popular destination among the Finns,

with one trip in four, or a total of nearly 1.5 million trips, heading to Estonia. Sweden takes the second place in the highest number (738,000) of trips overseas and the third highest (610,000) to Spain (Statistics Finland – 2012). This could explain the changes taking place in the Nordic tourist travel patterns, where taking more than one vacation each year is increasing. For example, the Finnish tourists take city breaks in the Easter period or autumn holidays, and then a longer vacation in the summer or over the winter holidays.

The statistics show that the warmer European countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea are the most popular destinations for the residents of Northern Europe; however, destinations such as Egypt, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Tunisia are increasing in popularity. Kurdistan has similar cultural traits and climate to these countries, and could be considered as both a strength and opportunity for the development of Kurdistan as a tourism destination among the Finnish tourist market.

### **7.1.2 Factors behind the travel**

With the high amount of travel and travel experiences in the past, the Finnish tourists are searching for new perspectives in their lives that offer the ability to connect with locals while discovering new fascinating destinations. Other aspects which modify their travel are uniqueness, authenticity, sustainability, as well as wellness.

Nordic tourists prefer to travel to destinations with a warm climate where they have the possibility to unwind and spend time with their family and friends. Other elements that attract Nordic tourists to travel abroad are to explore larger cities and different cultures.

### **7.1.3 The main Finnish tourist segments**

For a new destination that is aiming at entering the Nordic market, it is preferable that the focus is set on the following three segments; families with children, singles with no children, and empty nesters.

It is common in the Northern countries that both the parents are employed, which causes lack of family time spent together and therefore are these travels abroad an escape from the daily routines as well as a time to be shared together and bonding. Previously the choice of destination was the most important aspect of the holiday, while now the focus is for the holiday to be more luxurious (4-5 star hotels) for this segment, as well as child-friendly facilities. This has led to higher demands for all-inclusive packages, because of convenience and the ability to have control over the expenses.

The singles nowadays dare to travel alone, or with other singles. This is a growing phenomenon in the tourism industry. The advantages of travelling as a single are the freedom of exploring new things and destinations as well meeting new people. Because a large proportion of these single travelers have no children, this gives them the opportunity to take on more adventurous activities.

Empty nesters refer to adult couples, aged 45+ with no children living at home. The focus of this group used to be their time spent on their children and grandchildren, but in the future they will spend more time on themselves, and the biggest share of their leisure time consumption will be on travel.

### **7.1.4 Finnish consumer behavior in tourism**

Finnish tourists are becoming more and more demanding in terms of exploring unique travel experiences in the future. Getting acquainted with different cultures is also an element that attracts Finnish tourists. Unique encounters that travelers have not tried before will become more popular. For instance, cooking and tasting local meals would be a culinary experience. In addition, Finnish tourists are

similar to tourists from other Nordic countries, which have become more aware of the culture and environment of the places they visit. Furthermore, Finns are very price-conscious, expecting value for money and efficiency.

There are six critical features when Finnish tourists select tourism destinations which are culture and local people, climate, cleanliness, active holidays, shopping and good cuisine. Nevertheless, as their travel experiences become richer, they seem to be more attracted by destinations that are involved in self-development and creative expression.

According to the Nordic Outbound Travel Market, a research study revealed that Finnish tourists, in conjunction with the rest of the Nordic tourists, are considered to be the best tourists in the world - based on the following different categories; *willingness to speak the local language, polite and approachable, willingness to adapt to local culture, willingness to try the local cuisine, and give a generous tip*. Finnish tourists seem to easily adapt to the local culture, and are willing to speak their languages, try their cuisines, and in general are polite and approachable. However, when it comes to giving a generous tip, they only landed on the fourth place, “but since they are so well represented in all other categories they earn the right to call themselves *the best*”.

Finnish tourists are heavy users of information and communication technologies. Therefore, online information searches on the internet are the key tool of organizing trips. Finnish tourists favor to book their trips online because of its flexibility. They can plan their journeys exactly as they want by choosing, and comparing different alternatives. Certainly, they can organize their journeys whenever they want according to their schedule. Another reason of the increase use of booking online is also explained by the expectations in finding a good deal, for example, when booking a room at a hotel. The high level of the technology and communication platforms also means that social and mobile media plays an extremely important role promotion and marketing. Tour operators and travel

agents are recommended to increase their information and level of communication online to serve potential tourists.

## **7.2 Analyzing the Primary data**

The subchapter begins with the basic information about the respondents. Due to the low number of participants the data collected from the interviews were mostly descriptive and there was not much that could be interpreted to specific numbers or charts.

### **7.2.1 Background information of respondents**

As stated earlier in the text, all of the interviewees in this study are native Finnish. Three out of the six of the people interviewed are empty nesters, which mean that they are of age 45+ and have no children living at home. One of the three empty nesters is still in working life, while the other two are retired. Among the rest of the interviewees, one belongs to the family segment which indicates that he is a parent with children living at home, as well as that he has an occupation. The remaining interviewees are of younger age and belong to the single segment, and belonging to this segment indicates that none of these respondents have children.

### **7.2.2 Motivating factors influencing the Finnish choice of destination**

The most common reason for the interviewees to travel was to escape their daily routines, somehow to fully charge themselves for the life that awaits them at home after the travel. Among these, other purposes such as; to create new bonds (either among themselves, with the locals or other tourists at the destination), taste new and different cuisines, and activities were mentioned.

The interviewees consider sunny weather, and warm beaches, and the results clearly indicate the importance of the warmer climates when choosing a holiday destination. Another major indicator when planning and choosing the destination is the flight duration to the place, the fewer stops the better. The older generations

among the interviewees highly consider the cultural and historical aspect of the location before the visit.

Although the respondents are appealed by the country's warm climate, rich culture and history, they have also high concerns about the level of peace and security they could encounter during their visit in some particular destination. Safety issues were brought up in line with the questions related to Middle East and Kurdistan, where the interviewees discussed their concerns over the current political state and war issues occurring in or around the country. The interviewees segments most concerned about uncertainties and war were the empty nesters as well as the families.

*“We had planned to go on a vacation to Egypt this autumn, but because of the political uncertainties that are taking place there we chose Turkey instead.” - Family*

In connection to this observation, Kurdistan should be an attractive choice of holiday destination for the Finnish tourist since the region has relatively stable political status and a safe atmosphere in comparison to the rest of Iraq and the surrounding countries. Another reason for travelling there would be because of the Finnish tourists' interest in unique and diverse experiences, cultural and historical attractions.

### **7.2.3 Kurdistan in the eyes of the Finnish tourist**

During the interview Empty nester1 brought up a different perspective of how Kurdistan is kept out from being a destination option among Finnish tourist, meaning that due to its geographic location in the Middle East being surrounded by Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria media for the most part portrays Kurdistan as a dull, grey, and dry area. After learning, based on our PowerPoint presentation, the interviewees were positively surprised that Kurdistan was such a developed area, especially considering where it is positioned. This can be interpreted clearly in the following comment made by one of the interviewees.



*“It is surprising to see that Kurdistan has such green scenery, because how media portrays Kurdistan is understood as a very dry and rugged area.” – Empty nester1*

Half of the interviewees had more knowledge of Kurdistan than the average Finnish tourist, on the grounds that they have or have been associated with Kurdish people. Because of these associations their interest toward Kurdistan has raised, which has made them seek for more information. This half of the group consists of tourists from the family and empty nesters segment. The following quote indicates how Empty nester3 feels about visiting Middle-East.

*“Why would I travel to a place where its people run away from?”*

However, this participant would be willing to visit Iraqi Kurdistan, despite of its location, because of the peacefulness of the area.

The single segment had a change of view after the PowerPoint presentation, where they at first imagined Kurdistan being poorly developed with non modern touch, but later held an opposite view of Kurdistan being luxurious and expensive. One of the singles stated “that looks like out of my reach”. In some cases it was clearly noticeable that after seeing the pictures of Kurdistan some of the participants’ attitudes were modified to a more favorable and positive ones when considering Kurdistan as a holiday destination. In other cases it both confirmed their view and already existing thoughts on Kurdistan before the pictures or it was what they expected to see.

One noticeable and repeatable feature among all the interviewees was the importance and interest of the destinations local people and food. As found also in the analyzing part of the Finnish tourist market, Finns as tourists are more willing to interact with the locals as well as will to try to speak their languages and taste their cuisine.

*“Besides the climate, getting to know the local people and trying their food are the things I am looking for when choosing a holiday destination” – Family*

## **8 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter will review the interpretations made in the preceding chapter, with the guidance of the theory framework to conduct a conclusion to the thesis as well as hold a discussion along with the research questions, which are:

- A. How does one's attitudes, knowledge, and behavior influence the choice of holiday destination?
- B. How important is the destination image?
- C. What is the Finnish tourist's attitude and behavior towards Kurdistan as a tourism destination?
- D. How can Kurdistan be marketed in a way that reaches the requirements of the Finnish tourist?

### **8.1 Essential Findings of the Results**

The main reason behind the travels of the Finnish tourist is to experience a change of climate, and to have time to relax with family, friends and relatives. Other elements that attract the Finnish tourist and modify their travel are uniqueness, authenticity, sustainability, as well as wellness.

Finnish tourists, together with the other Nordic tourists, are considered to be the best tourists in the world - based on these five categories; willingness to speak the local language, polite and approachable, willingness to adapt to local culture, willingness to try the local cuisine, give a generous tip. They easily adapt to new cultures and languages, and have an interest for trying local food and getting to know the local people. This reveals that the Finnish tourists have the requirements necessary to be a potential tourist target group for Kurdistan.

Finnish people have a tendency to travel more, and pay more for their travels related to their relatively high incomes. This was strengthened in the interview

research where money concern was not an issue for the majority of the interviewees; only Single1 selects holiday destinations based on the travel expenses.

It is shown in the research that all the participants had some basic knowledge of Kurdistan, such as its geographic location. However, most of the older participants had more knowledge than the average Finnish tourist, as previously discussed, therefore their attitude towards Kurdistan as a tourist destination were more favorable as stated in Chapter 2 (Attitude- formation) in the theoretical framework. As argued in the chapter, the more familiar the consumer is with a product the clearer the attitude, whether being a favorable or unfavorable. This is seen also in the analysis of the Finnish tourist market, where Finns continuously tend to travel to Sweden and Estonia because of their undifferentiating and familiar elements. These two countries allegedly satisfy and fulfill the needs and demands of the Finnish tourists, therefore the repeated visits. This, however, does not indicate that because of their knowledge, positive attitude and more favorable image it will necessarily lead to a behavioral action when choosing a holiday destination.

In the study the questions asked about Middle East evoked some concerns related to the safety and security of a holiday destination. Due to the political instabilities in the area, it has led to an unfortunate dark image of the Middle East. Because of this the Middle East is not on the top travel destinations of a Finnish tourist, especially among the family segment. None of the interviewees have visited the Middle East; however they had strong opinions of the place due to media exposure. Empty nester3, being involved in politics before, had a negative view of the place and media strengthens his view even more by exaggerating the political struggles. For these reasons the image of the Middle East as a holiday destination is very vague and fouled. The participants stated during the interview how the power of media has impacted their view and hidden the possibilities of considering a place such as Kurdistan in the Middle East as a holiday destination.

Moreover, consumers are not only influenced negatively by the messages portrayed through the media but also by the poor marketing enforcement by destination tourism organizations. As the theory in Chapter 4 presents the importance of developing and maintaining a destination image in order for the destination to be able to reach out to its potential target group, it is crucial that the tourism organizations in a positively aggressive way tries to stand out despite all the imprecise and unfavorable news. This proved to us that the destination image in fact has a big impact on the choice of holiday destination among the Finnish tourists.

As can be seen technology has made today's world seem smaller, metaphorically, information reaches from side of the world to the other within minutes, if not seconds, thanks to social media and the internet. As an outcome of this, people are more aware of one another and the consequences of this high usage of information and communication technologies the accessibility and availability of a destination online is of significant matter. Especially for the family segment, the possibility of creating packages and activities in advance is considered convenient and a way to control over their expenses. All-inclusive travels are becoming more popular among the Finnish family segment, making the countries such as Egypt and Turkey popular among the Finnish tourists. Having close similarities in both culture and climate with these countries, Kurdistan could one day in near future be able to offer the All-inclusive travel packages.

On the other hand, there are some negative aspects arising concerning the tourism development in Kurdistan. The rapid expansion that is taking place could lead to losing of the authentic aspects of Kurdistan. The thrive to become more westernized, for example building too many modern buildings which can destroy the natural beauty of Kurdistan, can have a poor influence on the tourist experience and attraction. This concern was pointed out by one of the participants after seeing the PowerPoint pictures of hotels and built attractions. Because Finnish tourist are experienced and have a travel history, and have been in the

countries like Turkey, Tunisia or Egypt and afterward possibly vacationing in Kurdistan can lead to not being offered anything unique, and authentic which can destroy the chances of standing out and developing an experience of its own for the tourist.

The interviewees in this research study have shown a favorable attitude toward Kurdistan and willingness to travel to the region. Based on their own previous knowledge four out of six of the participants gave an affirmative answer to the question; “would you travel to Kurdistan based on your own knowledge?”

## 8.2 How Kurdistan can be marketed to reach its potential Finnish tourist

The aim of this study has been to investigate the behaviors and attitudes of the Finnish tourist towards Kurdistan as a holiday destination. The SWOT analysis is an effective tool to use for this purpose. SWOT analysis is a structured planning method used to evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of a subject.

<b>STRENGTHS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Climate &amp; Landscape</li><li>- Culture</li><li>- History</li><li>- People</li><li>- Attractions</li><li>- Investment</li><li>- Variety of accommodation</li></ul>	<b>WEAKNESSES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Location</li><li>- Weather</li><li>- Lack of Marketing</li><li>- Booking possibilities</li></ul>
<b>OPPORTUNITIES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- International investment</li><li>- Built attractions</li><li>- Tourism development</li><li>- Marketing</li><li>- Direct flights</li><li>- Destination image</li><li>- Travel packages</li></ul>	<b>THREATS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Political instabilities</li><li>- Location</li><li>- Media image</li><li>- Unsuccessful tourism development</li></ul>

*Strengths:* All the above mentioned features can be considered as strengths which Kurdistan possesses. Kurdistan obtains all the required features for a Finnish tourist when seeking a holiday destination, especially for those who look for an

ideal destination with untouched mountain scenery and ancient archeological sites. With the tourism development enters different accommodation verities, both domestic and international, which can fulfill the requirements of all the mentioned segments in the Finnish tourist market.

*Weaknesses:* Where Kurdistan is located is undeniably its most substantial weakness, because of the surrounding states and their unpredictable political climate. Another major weakness is that Finns tend to travel longer during the summer, which is not a suitable time to travel to Kurdistan due to its high temperature degrees. Kurdistan lacks a proper tourism marketing (e.g. unavailability for travels to be booked online) which could enhance the chances of reaching its potential Finnish tourists.

*Opportunities:* New businesses are being established in Kurdistan which can be seen as a huge opportunity for the region that can benefit the tourism development also. As the development of the region is growing, this allows the opportunities to be put into action faster.

One of the great advances of being in the development and establishing stage is having the opportunity of observing the external and internal factors that affect and are of importance for the potential tourist, so a unique, authentic, and appealing destination image can be produced.

*Threats:* On the account of not being an independent region, Kurdistan can be dragged into unfortunate scenarios because of its association of being a part of the unsafe Iraq. This leads to imprecise image representation of the region in the media, which one of the interviewees commented on, and thus prevents the possible tourist from considering Kurdistan as a future holiday destination.

For Kurdistan to even enter the Finnish tourist market, it is required that they research the Finnish tourist behavior, attitude, and traveling habits in tourism. This improves their chances of understanding their potential tourist, and taking into consideration their wants and needs. This way Kurdistan can create a clear



guideline for the start of a good marketing plan, as well as for the implementation part of the marketing. Once the knowledge and the study of the Finnish tourist market has been obtained, establishing good relations to tourism organization in Finland is of importance, so that Kurdistan is among one of the alternatives of holiday destinations when purchasing a travel arrangements. In regards to the importance of accessibility and availability online on booking channels such as *www.booking.com*, and *www.hotels.com*, would put Kurdistan on the map in the Finnish tourist market.

Besides being included into the known distribution channels, and have gained the potential tourists attention the marketers of Kurdistan need to be active on social mediums, and accommodate that interest. By frequently updating and providing necessary information to its target market, it can maintain a fresh image in the tourist's eye. Today, almost every company and any product can be found on social media channels such as Facebook, and YouTube. Kurdistan tourism has started promotional campaigns, which is a good start but it is in need of development and improvement.

Kurdistan being in the war zone and having a negative image in the tourism world makes the marketing of the area challenging for the tourism marketers. Finnish tourists have an old, non-modernized picture of the region, which may lead to second doubting when considering Kurdistan as a holiday destination. Based on this creating a good image for the destination can be a complicated task; however it is not impossible for Kurdistan to design a safe and appealing image for the Finnish tourist because the region has the potential requirements that not only the Finnish, but the Nordic tourists look for. The possibility of flying directly from most of the capital cities of Europe to Kurdistan allow the tourist to feel less in danger and enables the marketing chances of creating the positive image. In conjunction of this the marketer should emphasize on the safety of the tourist, because this is of a concerning issue among the Finnish tourists.

What Middle East is commonly associated with is being a strict and oppressing area where people lack freedom because of law and regulations that is forced upon them such as dressing codes, and no alcohol consumption. However, as presented in chapter 5 about Kurdistan, it states that unlike the rest of Iraq, tourists can wander the streets of Kurdistan freely and regardless of religious and linguistic backgrounds people live side by side without conflicts. This aspect and side of Kurdistan should be emphasized in the marketing of the area, where the area has the possibility to differentiate itself from the rest of Middle East.

## **9 RESEARCH CRITICISM AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES**

Even when the attitudes of these participants were modified after the interview into more favorable ones toward Kurdistan as holiday destination, it cannot be ascertained that these favorable attitudes are going to lead into in a positive behavioral action. This could be due to either respect for the researchers (being native Kurdish), or for the purpose of the study. As mentioned in the theory, consumers can have a certain attitude or behave in a sense that gives a pleasing answer that the researcher might be looking for.

Another criticism is that these topics are not easy to investigate based on one research method, in our opinion, it requires both qualitative and a quantitative research methods. For a more accurate and precise knowledge of Finnish tourist attitudes the researched group should consist of participants from different parts of Finland, so the result can represent the whole Finnish tourist market. Another impacting factor is the quantity of respondents so that the quality of the research result can be more reliable.

A more informative and reliable outcome could have been achieved if there had been the possibility of studying not only people who have not visited Kurdistan, but those who have as well. Moreover, the attitudes of the different groups could be examined, and see what result it has on their knowledge as well as their behavior, and vice versa, if their visit had an effect on their attitude.

Another research suggestion would be to interview the same interviewees 5-10 years from now, to evaluate their attitude changes, and if any one of them has visited Kurdistan. In addition to this another study area would be to investigate if Kurdistan's tourism progress has reached the Finnish tourist, making it a known destination and attractive tourism destination, and if they could categorize it as one of the visited destination similarly to Turkey and Egypt.

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## **APPENDICES**

Study on factors behind Finnish tourist choice of destination

- a) Gender
- b) Age
- c) Occupation

1. Tell us about your traveling habits – where do you usually travel
2. Where was your latest travel?
3. Who has been your traveling partner in your travels?
4. Have you Middle East? If yes, Where? If no, would you ever consider visiting?
5. What is your knowledge of Kurdistan?
6. Where have you gained this knowledge?
7. Would you consider visiting Kurdistan, based on your knowledge?









8. Has your image of Kurdistan changed?